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Senate Probe Staff Report Cites CHAOS

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Senate investigators said yesterday that the Central Intelligence Agency's domestic spy work represented "a step toward the dangers of a domestic secret police," but they shied away from calling it illegal.

The mildly worded report

contrasted with the findings of the Rockefeller Commission, which last year labeled some of the CIA's domestic activities unlawful.

Dealing primarily with the CIA's Operation CHAOS, the Senate intelligence committee staff study said that the CIA amassed files on thousands of Americans under pressures from Presidents Johnson and Nixon to check out their suspicions of "foreign influence upon American dissent."

The 51-page study, written primarily by staff lawyer Burton Wides, was the first devoted to the CIA out of a series of staff reports that the committee began making public more than a week ago as the Senate began debating creation of a permanent new oversight committee.

The study, which glossed over a number of the details brought to light by the Rockefeller Commission, pointed out that Operation CHAOS was the centerpiece of a major CIA effort begun in 1967 to gather and evaluate "all available information about forging links to racial, antiwar and other protest activity in the United States."

Before it ended in 1974, the project compiled a computer system called "Hydra," including the names of some 300,000 American individuals and organizations and separate "personality" files on some 7,500.

The CIA repeatedly reported that it could find no international conspiracy behind the protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the report said. One 1968 study, entitled "Student Dissent," concluded:

"Except on the issue of Selective Service, the student community appears generally to support the administration more strongly than the population as a whole."

The CIA evidently regarded the spying as a violation of the agency's 1947 charter provision prohibiting it from exercising any "police, subpoena, law enforcement or internal security functions."

In a 1969 letter transmitting another study on student dissidence to White House national security adviser Henry Kissinger, then CIA Director Richard Helms cautioned:

"This is an area not within the charter of this agency, so I need not emphasize how extremely sensitive this makes the paper. Should anyone learn of its existence, it would prove most embarrassing for all concerned."

The Rockefeller Commission said last June that "some domestic activities of Operation CHAOS unlawfully exceeded the CIA's statutory authority" and singled out such items as excessive collection of domestic data and the use of agents to collect information within the United States "on strictly domestic matters."

Much more guarded in its conclusions, the Senate study said only that CHAOS activities came "close to prohibited internal security functions . . . to the extent that information related to domestic activity."